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Major Hostilities Between Syria and Israel

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23 April 1974

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April 23, 1974

INTERAGENCY MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Major Hostilities Between Syria and Israel*

INTRODUCTION

This paper was developed to make judgments on the likely outcome of major hostilities between Syria and Israel. The principal conclusions are:

- Neither side is likely to deliberately initiate major fighting before Secretary Kissinger's coming trip. The present level of military activity is expected to continue pending the outcome of US efforts in the next few weeks to achieve a disengagement.
- In the event of major hostilities, the net military advantage will rest with Israel. If the Syrians achieved tactical surprise concerning the time and place of attack, they probably would make some initial gains, although Israel would almost certainly contain the attack within a day or two.
- The longer major hostilities are prolonged the greater will be the involvement of other Arab countries. The Saudis will be increasingly driven toward reimposition of the oil embargo. The pressures on Sadat to open a second front will be almost irresistible after about a week.
- Should major hostilities break out the Soviets will augment their naval forces, begin resupply of Arab forces, and exert diplomatic and military pressures to bolster

* This memorandum was developed in consultation with representatives of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the ACSI Army, the ACS/I Air Force, and the Director of Naval Intelligence.

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the Syrians. Should Israeli successes endanger Damascus or threaten to destroy Syria's army, the Soviets would probably deploy airborne troops unless subjected to extreme deterrent pressure by the US.

- The prospects for Syria and Israel resuming negotiations after major hostilities are best if the war is short and indecisive. A decisive Israeli victory or prolonged fighting would diminish prospects for negotiations.

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I. THE SITUATION

1. The Syrian military actions on the Golan Heights are meant to emphasize the fragility of the ceasefire and to put pressure on the Israelis to conclude a disengagement accord. Although the Syrians were reluctant initially to accept the ceasefire, they now seem willing to try to obtain through negotiations what they were unable to hold onto on the battlefield. Both the Syrians and the Israelis, for domestic political reasons, feel they must make maximum demands and only grudging, minimal concessions. The current situation is complicated by the governmental crisis in Israel. An early disengagement accord may not be possible, but both sides are sufficiently interested in negotiations that they will seek to prevent a complete impasse.

2. By keeping the Golan battle alive, President Asad has deflected internal pressure on him to renew full-scale hostilities while maneuvering toward the conference table. The indications are that the Syrian strategy is to pursue a limited war of attrition in order to drain Israel economically and psychologically and to pressure for a disengagement requiring significant Israeli withdrawals. The Syrian strategy may also allow for efforts to reoccupy key positions lost during the October War.

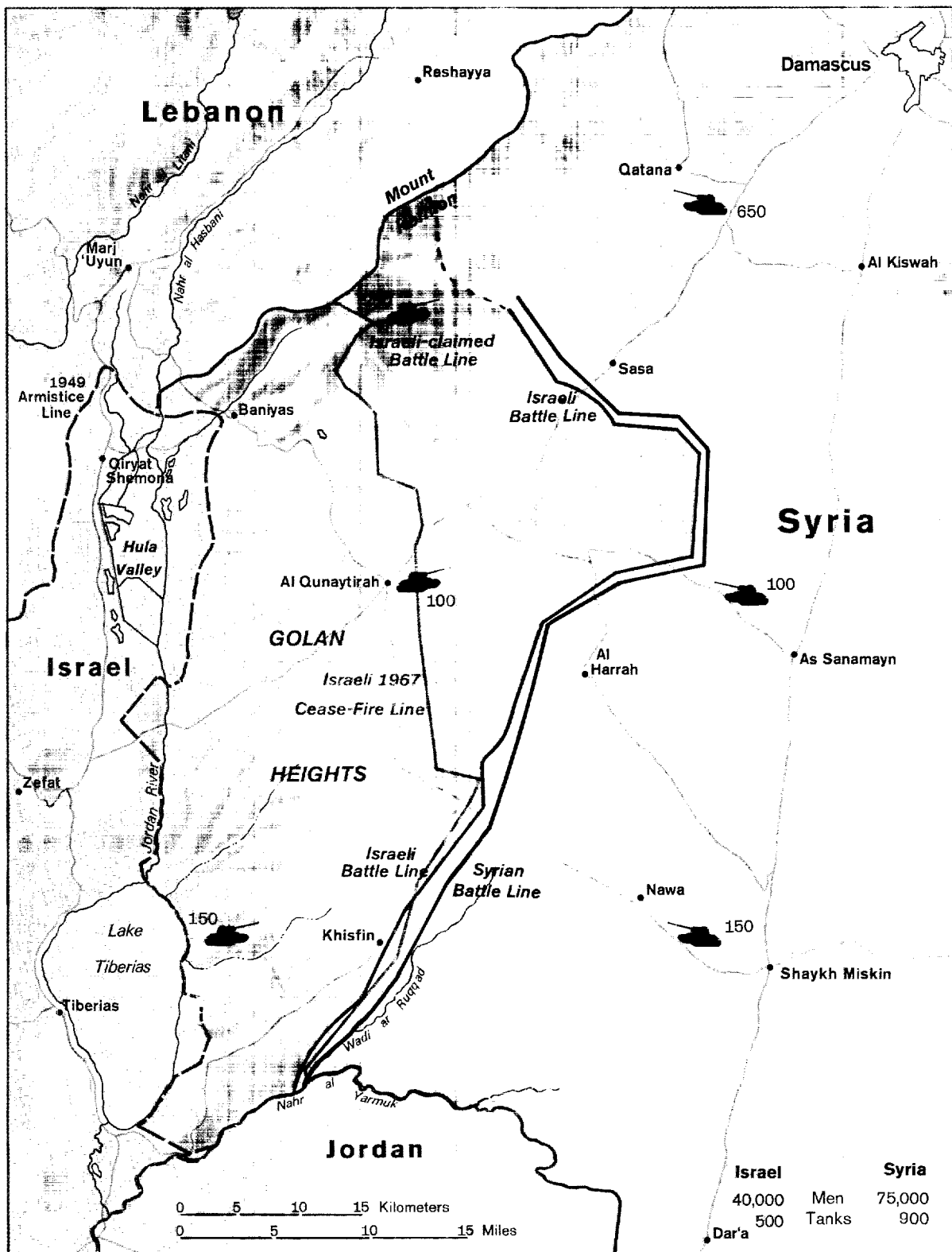
3. Israeli doctrine has, in the past, called for avoiding prolonged military action. Until now they have adopted a policy of limited reaction but at the same time have made it clear that Tel Aviv will not allow the war of attrition to be governed by Syria's rules.

4. Palestinian attitudes and fedayeen activities represent the "wild cards" in the current Syrian-Israeli scenario. The more moderate PLO elements under Arafat's leadership are coming under pressure to resume acts of terrorism. The fedayeen extremists can undertake action which could draw the Arabs or Israelis into escalating confrontations sought by neither side. The likelihood of such confrontations increases the longer the stalemate continues without tangible progress toward a disengagement agreement.

II. RELATIVE CAPABILITIES

5. In the present lineup of opposing forces on the Golan, the Syrians have more ground forces, tanks and artillery than Israel. (See Map.) This numerical advantage has been decreasing

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over the last week, however, as the Israelis have moved more tanks and troops to the Syrian front. The Israeli ground forces have proven themselves to be superior to the Syrians especially in the use of armor and mobile warfare. The Israeli Air Force still has the capability of establishing air superiority over Syria but the cost to Israel has been raised in recent years by an improved Syrian air defense system including some forty SAM battalions and thousands of AAA pieces.

6. Israeli reserve forces are also superior to Syria's forces. Israel could, within 3-4 days, move sufficient units to the Syrian front to achieve numerical superiority over the Syrian Army. This is a feasible course of action so long as there is no threat of significant fighting in the Sinai or on the West Bank.

7. Syrian forces have improved their defensive capabilities since the October War by constructing fortified positions and formidable tank obstacles along approaches to Damascus. The reconstitution of the SAM system by the USSR has at least restored the Syrian air defense capability of pre-October. The improving spring weather in the Golan area partially compensates for some of these Syrian advantages by providing the Israeli Air Force more flexibility than in October.

8. If major hostilities were to resume, the net military advantage would rest with the Israelis and permit successful offensive or defensive operations. The Syrians could hold the upper hand, however, in the early stages of a carefully planned operation in which they achieved tactical surprise concerning time and place of attack.

III. LIKELY COURSES OF ACTION

9. Syria. The Syrian armed forces could continue their current level of activity on the Golan Heights but more likely they will design their exchanges of artillery, tank, and small arms fire so as to inflict heavier casualties on the Israelis. They could also increase their attacks to seize limited objectives with company or battalion-sized forces similar to recent operations on Mount Hermon. They are unlikely to escalate the fighting beyond this point unless they lose hope in the present negotiations. A large-scale, multi-divisional Syrian attack to regain the territory captured by Israel in the October War is possible but is the least likely course of action at this time.

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10. Israel. At the present level of Syrian provocations the Israelis are not expected to mount a strong offensive against Syria. They can be expected, however, to at least match the intensity of Syrian military initiatives.

11. Israel cannot afford to jeopardize US support and is unlikely to initiate major retaliatory action this near to Secretary Kissinger's announced visit. However, if the Israelis came to believe that a major Syrian offensive was impending, they would take preemptive action.

12. If major fighting breaks out, the Israelis are expected to avoid massive armor-infantry frontal attacks against the Syrian strong points. They would probably seek to encircle the front-line divisions in an effort to destroy the Syrian offensive capability. Such an encirclement would also hold hostage the remaining Syrian forces, similar to the situation created for the Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai, thereby improving Israel's bargaining position.

13. Other Arabs. Despite the presence of some 8,000 non-Syrian Arab forces now in the country, Syria can count on little initial military support from other Arab countries. Iraq is involved in a border dispute with Iran and preoccupied with the troublesome Kurds and could free, at a maximum, one division if pressed. Jordan will seek to avoid involvement, despite Hussein's desire to be seen as a supporter of the Arab cause and dissatisfaction among some Jordanian military over the lack of a national commitment to the October War. Unless Jordan were directly attacked, King Hussein would not be expected to do more than contribute a brigade or two to the Syrian-Israeli front.

14. Saudi Arabian support for Syria is potentially formidable, through its newly acquired economic and political status. Militarily, Saudi support would not be significant. But if major hostilities resume Saudi Arabia would at least threaten reimposition of the oil embargo in an effort to bring US pressure to bear on Israel. In any escalating Syrian-Israeli confrontation, King Feisal can be expected to become more adamant in his support of Syria.

15. Sadat has a substantial stake in continuing the US-initiated peace settlement process. His own participation, in part, depends on support from other Arab countries that he will

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lose if he does not demonstrate his support for Syria. The several hundred Egyptian military pilots, crews, and technicians now in Syria are probably a sufficient token of Egyptian support at the current level of fighting. But, if the fighting reached major proportions, and the Syrians were in serious trouble, we expect Sadat to send air and air defense units as well as one or two air-mobile infantry units to the Syrian front.

16. Sadat would be very reluctant to jeopardize his hard-won position in the Sinai by opening a second front but the pressures to do so would be tremendous and could become irresistible if major Israeli-Syrian hostilities continued as long as a week. As a warning to the Israelis, the Egyptians might first mobilize and then move tanks and artillery up to the Suez Canal in violation of the disengagement agreements.

IV. SOVIET INVOLVEMENT

17. Interests and Influence. The primary Soviet concern is to preserve the influence and presence they have in the Middle East. Any leverage the Soviets have rests primarily on their economic and military assistance. But the willingness of conservative Arab oil states to subsidize Syria and Egypt makes Soviet economic aid less necessary in the long term and military assistance can eventually be purchased elsewhere.

18. Military Roles. Despite their diminishing influence in the area the Soviets still use Egyptian and Syrian ports for repair and replenishment for their Mediterranean naval forces. Some Arab airfields are still available to the Soviets for military aircraft, staging, and reconnaissance although largely in support of Arab interests. The Soviets have already replaced most of the military equipment lost in last year's war. In some cases they have upgraded the quality of equipment by, for example, replacing destroyed T-55 tanks with newer T-62s, and are reported to be providing new weapons such as MIG-23 FLOGGERS and SCUDs to Syria. They are actively involved in Syrian air defense and have around 2,000 military advisors assisting Syrian forces. In Egypt, they also are training two SCUD brigades.

19. Should major hostilities break out the Soviets would immediately augment their naval forces and reinstitute their air and sea lift to replace lost military equipment, as they did in October 1973. To the degree the Syrian forces were

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suffering reverses, the Soviets would encourage other Arab military assistance, urge another oil embargo, develop pressure on the international scene and press the US to restrain Israel.

20. If Israeli air raids were taking a serious toll on Syrian cities or attacks against ports and airfields were interfering with resupply operations, the Soviets would almost certainly send Soviet-manned air defense units to Syria. If not already in place, the Soviets would send SCUDs for Syrian retaliation against Israeli population centers.

21. Should an Israeli ground advance endanger Damascus or threaten to destroy the Syrian army (as the Egyptian Third Army was threatened in the October 1973 war), the Soviets would first threaten to come to Syria's assistance, alert airborne divisions and intensify efforts to assure US cooperation in stopping the fighting. If this effort failed to end the fighting the Soviets unless subjected to extreme deterrent pressure by the US would probably deploy airborne troops to preserve their influence and presence in Syria and put additional pressure on Israel.

V. LIKELY OUTCOME OF HOSTILITIES

22. Existing military supply arrangements for Israel and Syria appear to be adequate to support the present level of equipment losses. Major hostilities would evoke immediate requests for resupply and would involve equipment losses requiring significant and visible resupply efforts. Major shipments of ammunition and other expendables would be necessary within a few days to prevent serious degradation of combat capability.

23. Under the most favorable conditions, Syria would probably achieve initial success and regain some territory in the Golan. It is unlikely that major Syrian units would be able to penetrate the pre-1967 boundary of Israel although some small units might get into the fringes of Israel proper. Some damage to Israeli installations or settlements could be expected from air strikes, artillery or rockets. The Israelis would almost certainly be able to contain the Syrian attack after a day or two. Israeli counterattacks would restore the lost territory within one week. The personnel and equipment attrition rates would be on the same order as in the October War.

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24. The threat of Syrian retaliation by SCUD or FROG attacks might initially deter the Israelis from airstrikes against cities, ports, and refineries. The scale of hostilities will escalate and strikes on a wider range of economic and industrial targets seem likely.

25. The prospects for further Syrian-Israeli disengagement negotiations after another round of hostilities are uncertain. If the war is short and indecisive the Syrians and Israelis will likely heed requests to accept a ceasefire and to resume negotiations. On the other hand, if the Israelis achieved a decisive military victory, or the fighting was prolonged and other Arab states or the USSR became involved, prospects for further negotiations would be dim.

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25 April 1974

The Honorable James R. Schlesinger
The Secretary of Defense
Washington, D. C. 20301

Dear Jim:

I thought you might be interested
in the attached memorandum and
interagency report which was sent to
Henry today.

Sincerely,

/s/ Bill

W. E. Colby
Director

Attachment:

DCI memo to Secretary Kissinger
dtd 24 Apr 74, Subj: Major Hostilities
Between Syria and Israel

Distribution:

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